

REFLECTIONS

Making Changes to Overcome a Plateau

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Change happens every day, on personal and organizational levels, with or without our participation. Most humans dislike change, yet our brains are wired to appreciate novelty and new things. Likewise, stability is a requirement of successful organizations, but so, too, are innovation and disruption.

It is incumbent on each of us to reflect regularly on change and manage the changes we confront or strive to create. One of the best ancient sources on change management that remains extraordinarily relevant today, regardless of religious views, is the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes—a word traditionally translated as teacher or preacher.

A more recent resource that addresses change and the real-life situations we all face in our professional life is Judith Bardwick's *The Plateauing Trap: How to avoid it in your career and your life*. In a little over 200 pages, Bardwick suggests some constructive and creative ways to deal with the inevitable stage in our professional life when we reach a plateau—for example, our career has stalled, the work is no longer exciting, and the future promises more of the same.

Bardwick starts by asking a fundamental question: Are you actively unhappy, or just not happy? The difference is that when you are truly unhappy, change comes more easily than when you are simply discontented. Most of us do not make changes in our lives until the pain in the present eclipses our fear of the future. When the negatives are powerful, the need for change is obvious.

Bardwick notes that constructive change is evolutionary. It requires giving up patterns of attitudes and actions that have served us well in the past, but no longer do so in the present and/or will not in the foreseeable future. It involves a process of growth, expanding our capabilities and broadening our involvements.

Career Plateauing Problems

According to Bardwick, we all face three different kinds of plateauing problems: structural, content, and life.

Structural plateauing can best be described in terms of a pyramid structure. As we work our way up the pyramid, at some point we reach the end of promotions. Many of us who are part of the Baby Boom generation are facing that situation now—there are a lot of us and only so many top jobs, especially as organizations have flattened their management hierarchies over the past couple of decades.

Content plateauing occurs when we become expert in our jobs. Without enough new things to learn or opportunities to grow or progress, we get bored.

Life plateauing often occurs in middle age, when we begin to feel trapped. We did what we expected to do, and now it seems that little other than retirement or new and different pursuits await us.

What can we do about plateauing? We can and must grow, both professionally and personally, to avoid the three plateaus and guarantee that we will have a more enjoyable present and positive future.

I experienced this myself. My first jobs included putting catalog cards into the catalog and faxing, one page at a time, on a round drum. Hard to believe how far technology has come in less than 50 years!

To enhance my knowledge and skills while at the same time continuing to work in libraries, I moved from a public library to an academic library to a law school library. I then made a switch to the world of special libraries, including a corporate business library, an AmLaw100 law firm, mid-sized law firms, and the legal department of a large international bank.

These constant changes allowed me to experience new challenges that required learning new skills, doing different things, and using different and ever-changing technologies. That is why I can continue to say that I love my profession and look forward to going to work nearly every day.

My career journey is only one example of the many ways we can overcome the structural plateauing that can face us professionally. Following are some other ways:

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- We can change pyramids, meaning we change employers or learn new skills to take on new roles and responsibilities.
- We can navigate within the pyramid by moving geographically, for example, or by serving a different kind of client.
- We can change our job by making a lateral move if a promotion is not available.
- We can add to our skills and knowledge and apply them in our current position.

Of course, not everyone reaches his or her “ultimate” library job, but if we keep changing the content of our job and continue adding new skills to our arsenal, we can avoid the feeling of structural plateauing.

Three Keys to Growth

By embracing change as a positive and inserting it into our professional and personal lives in regular, controlled amounts, we can go beyond overcoming the plateaus we sometimes face and continuously reinvent ourselves. There are three keys to embracing change:

- **Take on new challenges.** Seek them out; don't wait for them to come to you.
- **Add to your abilities.** Continuing education and training are essential in today's digital and knowledge-driven economy.
- **Learn new techniques.** Use your experience to improve existing techniques and processes—and complement them by learning new ones.

Continuous learning is necessary for continuous challenge. We can also consider using our knowledge or skills in different ways, such as by mentoring, coaching, or training a colleague. We might consider changing the percentage of time we spend on other commitments, such as giving more time to our children, our hobbies, our community, or ourselves.

If we make continued learning and mastery of new problems our path in life, we will avoid the monotony of facing plateaus, feel happier, and be our best selves—all at the same time. So get out there and accept and embrace change, using it to have a more fulfilling life! **SLA**

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